The water system that powered the textile mills was equally important for the shoe industry. Auburn, Maine once boasted the largest shoe factory under one roof in the country.

**Brief history:** About the same time that textile mills were starting in Lewiston, entrepreneurs were becoming the shoe barons of Auburn. There were several shoe shops started during the 1860s. A notable manufacturer was Ara Cushman who experimented with a canvas-top/leather-sole shoe during the 1870s. It was his son, after the company became the Cushman Hollis Company, who, in 1904 introduced both white canvas shoes and athletic shoes, making Auburn the “White Shoe City of the World.” At its heyday, there were 2,100 persons employed, producing 26,000 shoes per day throughout several shops.

Production declined measurably following World War I and with the Great Depression. In 1937, a 96-day Shoe Strike led to violence and the presence in town of the National Guard for 17 days. As a result of the strike, many workers were too fearful to return to work, and out of work, lost their homes. The strike had been precipitated by the presence of the young CIO coming to town. Later, L-A workers formed an independent union, the L-A Shoe-Workers Protective Association.

Shoe production in Auburn continued into the last half of the 20th century. There were several Auburn shoe shops still in existence during the 1970s.

**Production:** The making of a shoe is an involved process. The shoe industry dates back to colonial New England when shoes were produced by cobblers working at home or in small shops. The Industrial Revolution, with the invention of machines like the sewing machine, revolutionized the production of shoes. However, it was not until the 1880s that all the processes were mechanized. An Afro-American, Jan Matzeliger invented the “lasting machine” to mechanically affix the upper to the sole in 1885. This machine could produce between 150 to 700 pairs of shoes in a day.

How many of you own or have ever owned a pair of hand-sewn loafers? Are you aware that to produce such a shoe, there are 110 separate steps involved—and that is just AFTER the Foreman has collected the leather, the tags (instructions) and sorted the leather.

The steps workers performed included 24 separate cuts in a Cutting Room, using “dies” or patterns for the pieces that would become the shoe. Then, there were 51 operations in the Pre-fit Room. The Hand-sewing Room involved exactly what it says—hand-stitching. And hand-stitching was done as “piece-work” and sometimes was sent home with the women and girls who earned more, the more shoes they completed. In the Finish Room, operations included the lasting process, roughing the bottom and sole, attaching the sole to the upper, then molding and
drying, after the leather had been steamed. Lastly, shoes were sent to a Packing Room where boxes were assembled and shoes placed in them. Then it was off to the Shipping Department.

While Museum L-A got its start collecting textile-related items, it soon became apparent that we needed to expand to the other key industries of this area. Certainly, the shoe industry was one of those. In addition to tools and samples from the shops, we have architectural features from some of the houses built by the shoe barons. Likewise, we are collecting information and artifacts related to brick-production. There are so many stories to tell, and we look forward to having our own home in an old mill building in the future.